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CURATED CHAOS: A RHETORICAL STUDY OF AXMEN

By

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Curated Chaos: A Rhetorical Study of Axmen

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In this study, the author uses mixed methods to analyze a three-dimensional place as a rhetorical artifact. The artifact, Axmen, is a family owned, for-profit retail store and a non-profit museum outside of Missoula, Montana. Using examples of the tangible and semiotic features found within the place, the author demonstrates and translates the rhetorical messages communicated there. These messages are then contrasted with the messages the owners and curators of Axmen want to communicate. The author argues that the current curation of museum artifacts and retail products is exclusive to white males, romanticizing blue collar work. This single-lens narrative of the past excludes “othered” demographics and undermines Axmen’s intended message of valuing the past and hard work. Reworking the tangible and semiotic features of the place with intention to authentically represent intersectional narratives will help this storytelling site appeal to a wider demographic and stay current America’s efforts to reframe history more authentically.

Introduction

The United States of America is in a swelling movement to give voice to groups previously unheard in a whitewashed, male-dominant narrative. For example, instead of focusing entirely on Thomas Jefferson's accomplishments, his Virginia homeplace, Monticello, is now diving into the complex story of Sally Hemings and African American slaves who once lived there (Nelson, 2018). This movement is not only reframing America's past to consider voices of other genders and / or race, it is also pushing for an updated paradigm in the present. In TIME magazine's 2017 "Person of the Year" issue, the publication featured scores of women breaking a societal silence on sexual harassment and assault in the workplace (Zacharek, et al., 2017). As historically marginalized groups fight for and find more opportunities to not only tell their story, but be heard by the larger population, many storytelling sites find themselves needing to reframe the stories told there.

Reframing history is complex. Nuanced, intersectional, stories take intention and time to tell. This is obvious in storytelling sites like interpretive centers, museums, and public gathering places. In these spaces lighting, colors, arrangement of items, word use, and material choices work together to weave an overarching message. In this project I explore how this kind of storytelling happens, and the associated implications of the message a place communicates. By using rhetoric of place, I consider how a site communicates and I apply these concepts to my own case study. With these considerations, I then offer suggestions on how my case study can better communicate its intended message. This iterative analysis of Axmen, a two-for-one retail store and nonprofit museum, is a lively example of the opportunities to reframe history in an intersectionally representative way.

Literature Review

Rhetoric's Roots and Expansion

Rhetoric of place is a scholarly lens which considers the tangible and semiotic features of a three-dimensional space and how they convey a message. Researchers use rhetoric of place to understand how memorials (Veil, Sellnow, and Heald, 2011), retail businesses (Dickinson and Maugh, 2004), and museums (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki, 2013), communicate abstract concepts like renewal, comfort, or the sublime (respective to list above). Despite the usefulness of this type of study, rhetoric of place studies remain infrequent in the landscape of academic research.

To understand rhetoric of place as a research lens, it is important to understand the field from which it derives. To that end I offer a brief history of rhetoric's expansion towards including visual and spatial artifacts. The field of rhetoric is as ancient as Socrates; it originates with Athenian philosophers in 600 B.C. (Sloane and Perelman, 2017). Rhetoric has a handful of common methodological approaches including the analysis of symbols, identification, structure, Burke's pentad, narratives, fantasy themes, myths, ideographs, representative forms, metaphors and genres (Kenney, 2005). Originally the study of individual orators, often "great White men;" during the mid-twentieth century the objects of study expanded to consider women, people of color, and social movements, among others. Eventually, rhetoric expanded beyond textual artifacts (or discursive symbols) such as oratory or written works to include visual artifacts such as paintings or advertising campaigns, and eventually place (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001; Burgchhart and Jones, 2017).

The first notable studies in rhetoric of place were in the 1990s (Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci, 1991; Dickinson, 1997). These studies took a three-dimensional artifact, or place, and interpreted the messages communicated by the tangible and semiotic features there. Blair et al.(1991) analyzed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. They found that although the memorial initially presents as modern architecture, deeper interaction with the memorial reveals it is a postmodern place, infused with the politics of postmodernity. This is an important finding because modernity is known to be categorical, defined, and straightforward. Postmodernity, in contrast, is known to be ambiguous, vague, and suggest multiple meanings. Therefore, using rhetoric of place to explain the way the Vietnam Veterans Memorial presents multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives, illustrates its postmodern messaging. Dickinson (1997) analyzed a shopping plaza outside of Los Angeles, created to look like an old western town. His findings on Old Pasadena illustrate how people seeks sites of memory and nostalgia to recreate their own identity as a way to cope with the fragmentation of postmodern society. Each of these studies are early demonstrations of stretching the idea of rhetorical artifacts to include the tangible and semiotic features of a three-dimensional place and using these artifacts to understand the messages inherent within. Roughly 25 years after rhetoric of place studies emerged, a small handful of scholars have developed this field into a critical lens that does more than evaluate how tangible and semiotic features of a place work to communicate a message. These studies and the spaces they evaluate offer significant insight and direction to individuals interested in achieving strategic communication in identified spaces.

When scholars opened the field of rhetoric to studies beyond the written word, new opportunities of visual and spatial rhetoric complicated the discipline. Traditionally, rhetorical scholars focused on discursive symbols, or the written or spoken language, as

found in speeches or written documents (Foss, 2005). Many scholars pushed back on expanding the field of rhetoric beyond discursive symbols and textual analysis, and these types of non-traditional rhetorical studies remain contested, messy and understudied (Foss, 1994). Foss (1994, 2004) makes a case for, and explains, the scholarly perceptions of visual rhetoric. She states that a primary question for visual rhetoric scholars is “Does the artifact successfully communicate its intended function?” (1994). This key question enables researchers to evaluate and make judgments of visual symbol use, a method distinctly different than traditional rhetoric, and other critical lenses of the visual realm. Traditional rhetoric analyzes written text or spoken words; stretching rhetoric’s scope to analyze visual symbol use expands rhetoric’s usefulness. Traditionally, scholars have used aesthetic critique to analyze visual symbols. Visual rhetoric incorporates some ideas from aesthetic critique; however, it offers a unique lens that may be more accessible to lay viewers not well versed in theories of fine art. I will offer a brief summary of aesthetic critique to explain how visual rhetoric is a different and useful lens for two dimensional artifacts.

Related Approaches

Aesthetic critique is perhaps the traditional way to evaluate non-textual, or visual artifacts. This tradition is robust and nuanced; in an “introduction” to visual culture, Sturken and Cartwright (2001) identify nine areas of consideration when it comes to visual artifacts. I mention these facets of understanding visual culture to demonstrate the layered, complex background an aesthetic critic brings to their understanding of visual symbols. This background, while insightful and revealing, is not one readily available to the lay-person interacting with visual artifacts. The areas of consideration include: 1) practices of looking: images, power, and politics, 2) viewers make meaning, 3)

spectatorship power and knowledge, 4) reproduction and visual technologies, 5) mass media and the public sphere, 6) consumer culture and the manufacturing of desire, 7) postmodernism and popular culture, 8) scientific looking, looking at science, and 9) the global flow of visual culture. Sturken and Cartwright examine this broad range of theoretical strategies to understand “how meaning is produced by and through images in their historical context” (2001, p.5). In other words, each of these nine areas are facets to understanding how visual symbols are exchanged, understood, and evaluated in the vast landscape of fine art, mass media, and the entertainment industry. A scholar versed in these nine areas may draw from their aesthetic critical training to know that a painting of food may not simply be about the food itself, but rather a representation of “the transience of earthly life through the ephemeral materiality of food” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p.13). Another example of how a scholar may use these theoretical approaches to translate meaning from visual symbols is translating why modern mechanical reproductions of Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream*, into inflatable figures or birthday cards is a gross distortion of the original creator’s intention of depicting the terror and angst of modern life in 1893 (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 125-126).

The aesthetic critical lens is influenced by cultural as well as political history. For instance, to understand the relationship between a viewer and images of women, aesthetic critique employs concepts of “the gaze,” to analyze how women are positioned as sexual beings or maternal figures in works of art (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Therefore, to understand the that a painting of a naked woman lounging on a couch with her eyes turned outward to the viewer, is steeped in socio-political implications of the “male gaze,” a scholar must be deeply versed in the history of art, its interpretations, and

critique. Using aesthetic critique to evaluate the visual is useful; however, it is often prohibitive to scholars or audiences with limited training in aesthetics. Visual rhetoric, therefore, is a means to explain these artifacts for “those without specialized training and knowledge, status and privilege... i.e., lay viewers- those not educated in art, design, or aesthetics” (Foss, 1994, p. 222).

Semiotics is another well-developed lens to analyze multi-modal communication such as visual or spatial. Semiotics is the study of “anything which ‘stands for’ something else” (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). Scholars who use this lens, or, semioticians, explore ‘sign systems’ which may include words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects to understand “how meanings are made and how reality is represented” (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). In other words, semiotics not only considers visual and spatial cues, but multi-sensory perceptions of a space processed through sound, scent and touch. Semiotics is mostly concerned with communication as signs. For instance, smoke is a sign for fire, and a boot-print is a sign a human passed through an area (Moriarty, 2005). For smoke or a boot-print to function as a sign, there must be mutual understanding between the sender and receiver of a sign; this allows a sign to function as an act of communication. Semiotics explains the process of how the communicative act of sign use by senders or receivers may stand for something else (ie. smoke as a sign communicates fire). Interpreting two-dimensional or three-dimensional artifacts through semiotics may be useful in examining how meaning is connected to the communicative acts of sign use, but it doesn’t provide a framework to judge or evaluate the meanings that are identified. Rather, the expanded rhetorical approach provides this framework (Foss, 1994), as argued below.

Rhetorically Analyzing Visual Symbols

Visual rhetoric offers ideas accessible to lay viewers and allows for an evaluation of the meanings identified through communicative signs. It is important to establish basic definitions before exploring how scholars approach this field. Visual rhetoric not only refers to a communicative artifact, it is also a perspective scholar may take on visual data (Foss, 2004). An artifact of visual rhetoric must have three characteristics which create boundaries for identifying it as such: “they must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating” (Foss, 2004, p. 304-305). I will demonstrate artifacts with these characteristics below.

A visual rhetorical perspective attributes meaning to a visual artifact; colors, lines, rhythms, and textures and can “provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions and ideas” (Foss, 2004, p. 306). This perspective is in contrast with an aesthetic response to a visual artifact which explores the “direct perceptual experience with the sensory aspects of an artifact” (Foss, 2004, p. 306); enjoying its color, form or texture intrinsically. Scholars continue to add to the field of visual rhetoric publishing work that deals with the nature, function, or evaluation of an artifact (Foss, 2004). Understanding the three approaches of nature, function and evaluation of rhetorical artifacts is key to understanding the lens I use to examine Axmen. In the following section I provide an overview of this work.

Nature of an artifact. Scholars concerned with the nature of an artifact explore the presented elements (physical features) and suggested elements (concepts, ideas, themes, allusions a viewer infers) of a visual artifact (Foss, 2004). For example, scholars researching gender, the natural world, and the rhetoric of advertising argue that image-based advertising creates gendered environments by appropriating nature to construct the audience’s denial of the connection between consumption and environment (Hope, 2004).

To make this claim, Hope analyzes the presented elements and suggested elements of various advertisements. One of her examples uses a promotion for the Buffalo Pan American Exposition of 1901, “Niagara.” She explains in detail the presented elements of “Niagara,” an advertisement that personifies the iconic waterfall as a slim young woman with “fertile shape of breasts and legs” still and posed, standing under a rainbow (Hope, 2004, p.157). The suggested elements of this visual rhetorical artifact then, are how depicting Niagara Falls as a voluptuous woman signifies nature’s unending fertility (Hope, 2004).

Function of an artifact. Scholars concerned with the function of an artifact explore the action that an artifact communicates. In other words, for what purpose / function was the artifact created, and what purpose / function do lay people perceive in the artifact? These types of studies often involve multi-modal features of a two-dimensional or three-dimensional artifact such as lighting, texture or smell. Dickinson analyzes an artifact’s ideological functions that construct viewers’ identities in particular ways (Aiello & Dickinson, 2014; Dickinson, 2002; Dickinson and Maugh, 2004; Dickinson, Ott, and Eric, 2005).

Aiello and Dickinson’s (2014) visual-material analysis of locality in the global redesign of Starbucks stores is particularly applicable to my study. Aiello and Dickinson (2014) examine visual and material components including the texture, color, lighting, smells, and sounds of four updated Starbucks coffee houses in contrast to more globalized store designs used within the company. They claim the significant shift from its former modern, soft-edged, light-colored aesthetic to salvaged materials reflective of local trade such as the ship industry in Seattle, rough-hewn surfaces, and dark colors communicates locality and authenticity. This communicative function, they claim, is an

attempt to appeal to larger public discourses pushing back on the consumerist culture of globalized markets (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014). These authors use multi-sensory components of a three-dimensional artifact, or place, to make a case about the rhetorical function of four Starbucks stores.

Evaluating an artifact. Lastly, scholars concerned with evaluating an artifact consider the function of that artifact and if the visual elements present achieve the identified function. For example, Strachan and Kendall (2004) analyze and evaluate the convention films of George W. Bush and Al Gore in the 1998 presidential campaign. Their rhetorical analysis highlights how the success of a political convention film “depends on evoking a favorable reaction from a cynical electorate suspicious of politicians’ motives” (Strachan and Kendall, 2004, p.152). They find that although Gore’s film portrays him as an archetypal American male qualified to hold office, it does not assert his position on the current nature of the country or its people. By maintaining focus on Gore’s identity, the film misses the opportunity to then bridge Gore, the political candidate, as an embodiment of patriotic values. Therefore, they argue that Gore’s film does not achieve its function because it does not forge strong emotional reactions to the candidate which could potentially lead to more political support (Strachan and Kendall, 2004).

Rhetoric of Place Definitions

Visual rhetoric was the field’s first expansion to examine artifacts beyond the written or spoken word. The line between studies that may be classified as visual rhetoric or rhetoric of place is blurry. Both often use tangible and semiotic features of an artifact to explore its rhetorical nature. Foss (2004) includes two and three-dimensional artifacts in her framework definitions of visual rhetoric. I believe that enough studies have been

published in rhetoric's expanded field to distinguish between the two approaches. For the purposes of this paper, I make the distinction that both visual rhetoric and rhetoric of place are expansions from rhetoric's traditional approach; however, dimensionality is the definitive factor in the difference between the two perspectives. Two-dimensional artifacts are analyzed through visual rhetoric. Three-dimensional artifacts are analyzed through rhetoric of place. From the examples discussed above, I classify Hope's (2004) analysis of advertising campaigns as *visual rhetoric*, because her artifacts are two-dimensional. In contrast, I classify Aiello and Dickinson's (2014) analysis of remodeled Starbucks stores as *rhetoric of place*, because their artifacts are three-dimensional.

Rhetoric of place studies include material and visual features of three-dimensional artifacts. The rhetorical artifact in Aiello and Dickinson's 2014 Starbucks study is four redesigned cafes. The authors immediately noticed each space's "novel emphasis on the store's 'materiality'" (p.308). They state, "The four Seattle locales were filled with knotty and discoloured wood paneling, live-edge granite countertops, organically shaped wooden tables, scratched slate boards, cracked leather armchairs, clotty concrete ceilings, unpolished metal fixtures, stools and sinks, and rustic canvas ropes and wall tapestry" (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014, p.308). This analysis of rhetorical artifact then, incorporates all components within the three-dimensional space of the cafe. This approach of evaluating visual and material elements in a developed three-dimensional space is the foundation of rhetoric of place studies.

Scholars using rhetoric of place as a lens typically consider a holistically immersive experience. While analyzing the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming, authors discuss artifacts and internal museum space, but also consider the experience of traveling to the museum (Dickinson et al. 2005). They write:

Our own initial trip conditioned our experience of the Center. We first traveled to the Buffalo Bill Museum from Fort Collins, Colorado, in April of 2002. After seven hours of travel by car, we found ourselves in the middle of Wyoming and deep in the heart of the West... it was bitterly cold and snow was falling lightly. As we approached the complex we noticed a large bronze statue of a horse and rider flanking the Center on an adjoining hill... The statue captures what, at some level, visitors already know – that they are in cowboy country, in Buffalo Bill's territory, which he austere oversees with his gaze and gun. (Dickinson et al., 2005, p 91-93)

These authors give their rhetorical artifact context by describing the travel, weather, and multi-sensory experience of entering the main space of the museum. Rhetoric of place studies benefit by explaining and understanding how the main place being analyzed fits and functions within its greater context of space / place (ie that experiencing the Buffalo Bill Museum is only possible after immersive travel through sparsely populated Wyoming, with its harsh weather, and that statues found outside the museum signify being in Buffalo Bill's Wild West). Setting the tone of entry, or immersion to the place being analyzed, helps the reader understand the material immersion of experiencing that place.

Analyzing visual / material components of immersive, three-dimensional spaces to understand the abstract messages conveyed in the space is a valuable tool. Rhetoric of place not only empowers lay viewers with a lens to understand communication in immersive experiences, the findings in this type of study offer powerful implications for individuals or organizations developing spaces. Both of the foundational studies I use in

my own case study have before and after studies of the artifact. Each study may stand alone but comparing and contrasting the before and after studies is powerful.

Scholars argue that “the story of the American frontier is a foundational myth” and that the Buffalo Bill Cody museum “privileges images of masculinity and Whiteness, while using the props, films, and posters of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West to carnivalize the violent conflicts between Anglo Americans and Native Americans” (Dickinson et al, 2005, p85). In contrast, the same authors evaluated the remodeled space eight years later. In this study, they claim the updated Whitney Gallery of Western Art (WGWA) located within the Buffalo Bill Historical Center (BBHC) reorganizes its content into themes, harmonizes those into a single vision, and uses Buffalo Bill Cody as an orchestrating figure to the sacred hymn of the Western sublime (Dickinson et al., 2013). In other words, the museum was updated from a dramatized fictional historical narrative, to one that more accurately tells the multi-faceted story of the American West. The museum updated its multi-faceted story presentation from chronological to thematic. Thematic groupings like wildlife, western landscape, Native Americans, western heroes and legends, and historic events are harmonized by the museum’s use of Buffalo Bill as an orchestrating figure. Having a similar space, similar tangible items, within the same context, shifts its message from privileged white masculinity and carnivalized violence to a harmonized thematic hymn of the sublimity of the West is significant.

Similarly, Dickinson’s first study of Starbucks design offers a contrast to the four remodeled cafes in 2009. Published in 2002, his initial study finds the natural colors, shapes and materials of Starbuck’s mass-produced cafes attempt to “suture individual bodies and subjectivities into a seemingly natural world” (Dickinson, 2002, p.5). In this study, Dickinson argues that the rhetoric of a Starbucks cafe works to claim authenticity

through the coffee and its rituals, by covering up “the sins of postmodern consumer culture” (2002, p.5). In contrast, the author finds a very different rhetorical message in remodeled cafes eleven years later. Aiello and Dickinson (2013) find the updated Starbucks cafes shift from authenticity to locality. Communicating locality, through visual and material cues, therefore, uses emplaced and embodied claims of difference. For example, the live-edge granite counter tops, rustic canvas ropes, and knotty wood paneling all signify resources specific to the cafe’s location, Seattle. These materials signify materials commonly found in the shipyards and harbor industry of Seattle. Using them throughout a cafe then, immerses a cafe-goer in the unique experience of this place. Materials to communicate locality would look different in Cody, Wyoming.

In both the Buffalo Bill studies, and the Starbucks studies, we can see how the same organization or place can shift its message through shifting the development of the space. This offers vast and poignant implications to already developed spaces, as well as spaces that will be developed from a blank slate. It shows that narratives and communication of a place can change, and in the case of Buffalo Bill Museum, and many others like it, should change. It also shows a societal shift in values. In 2002, perhaps Starbucks wanted patrons to experience a “sameness”. It’s important to note that retail spaces are developed in a way they believe will support the bottom line of the business- to make money. Incorporating unique, specific, materials, in cafe remodels is not an inexpensive feat for Starbucks. The authors explain the company’s shift:

Through the 1990s and well in the 2000s, Starbucks kept opening new stores across the world... eventually this mass customization approach became equated with McDonalidization and mass-produced, mediocre goods, which let to the ‘dilution’ of Starbucks’ brand identity. In 2009,

with Rubinfield charged again with store design, Starbucks announced its new global store design strategy, aimed at ‘setting the stage for a reinvigorated customer experience’. Starbucks’ fresh strategy linked its newly established aim to ‘source materials and employ craftsmen on a localized basis’ with environmental and lifestyle principles. This new design strategy expressed Starbucks’ social responsibility initiative, Shared Plant, organized around areas of activity like ethical sourcing, community involvement and environmental stewardship. (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014, p.306)

In other words, Starbucks, as a company, identified the need to reclaim their brand, and customer experience, so that it could be situated in the company’s redefined principles. These principles include social responsibility, community involvement, environmental stewardship, and ethical sourcing. With these intentions at the forefront, Starbucks vetted materials, lighting, size of tables, and layout of space, to communicate locality and difference (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014). Although their former approach, popular in the 1990s and 2000s was also intentionally developed, the principles of globalized sameness are in stark comparison to this new approach.

Research Questions

The curated spaces of museums, memorials, and even retail spaces speak volumes about what is important to the owners and curators of that space. Displaying elevates chosen items and narratives above others that may also be relevant (Dickinson et al., 2005). Interacting with a curated space, whether as a visitor, customer, or passerby, we are left to understand the space through a combination of the features found there and a viewer’s past experience. This past experience places meaning and context to the curated

items found there. Tangible features (historic artifacts, retail items, interpretive, or merchandising displays) and semiotic features (lighting, smell, textures) work together to reveal a place's rhetorical message.

Dickinson found in multiple studies that there is value in intentionally developing the tangible and semiotic features of a place (Aiello & Dickinson, 2014; Dickinson, 2002; Dickinson et al., 2005; Dickinson et al., 2013). The rhetorical analysis of my research site is guided by two questions. What does this site, as a place, communicate? And what does this site, as a place of business, seek to communicate? Inextricable from these main questions is a third and final question. What can the owners/curators of this place do to bridge the gaps between what they want it to communicate, and what it currently communicates?

My case study bridges a missing link for curators and developers of a space. Using rhetoric of place to evaluate the nature and function of this artifact will offer practical implications for how tangible and semiotic features work together to convey a message in a three-dimensional space. My research questions link descriptive rhetorical evaluation to prescriptive suggestions. These suggestions will be applicable to similar story-telling sites.

Method

To understand my research questions, and spend more time in the space, I accepted a consulting position with a local business named the Axmen. Axmen is many things in its sprawling campus of four acres. Primarily, the place includes a for-profit retail store and a non-profit museum. My consulting position had a main goal of developing a new retail product, as well as remodeling the space where this product would be sold. To establish a baseline of the space and how it is perceived, I administered

47 surveys in December 2016. Between December 2016 and August 2018, I logged over 2,000 hours in the space. During this time, I kept field notes, collected organizational documents, saved floor plan schematics, interviewed business leaders, and observed customer / visitor reactions.

This mixed methods approach incorporated rich, rigorous, methods from multiple scholarly traditions including qualitative research, participatory rhetoric, and rhetoric of place. From the qualitative research tradition I drew heavily from Tracy's (2012) work on complete participant research. Discussing the research she collected while working for a cruise ship (a total institution- where one works, lives, and spends time off), she states, "complete participants have access to a depth and breadth of the culture's deep background that gives them a unique standpoint from which they can make connections amount a span of issues that might otherwise go unnoticed" (Tracy, 2012, p.107). Axmen has facets that are similar to total institutions. The owners and primary leaders are blood relatives and use the space inextricably with their personal assets. For example, the Model T Ford milk delivery truck Grant and Guy Hansen restored while in high school, sits on the sales floor of Hearth and Home as part of the Montana Museum of Work History. This reverberates throughout the staff for employees to treat it as a "family business."

Participatory rhetoric makes a similar claim to the unique standpoint possible from qualitative's complete participation. Endres and Senda-Cook (2011) argue a researcher's physical presence at a protest shifts their analysis. They state that, "participation in a Critical Mass bike ride allowed one of us to experience the temporary reconstruction of the meaning of the city streets as it happened...These rides would be very difficult, if not impossible, to study without attending because they are usually not

documented beyond perhaps a short blip in the news” (2011, p.270). In other words, researchers derive different meaning of an event or place by participating in it, rather than relying on other’s accounts. Finally, as mentioned in my literature review, this analysis is modeled on visual-material considerations in previous rhetoric of place research. Rhetoric of place methods draw heavily from analyzing the tangible and semiotic features of a place, as well as internal or public documents about the business or organization (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014; Dickinson, 2002; Dickinson et al., 2005; Dickinson et al., 2013).

As a case study in rhetoric of place, I use Axmen as a three-dimensional, rhetorical artifact. Throughout my exploration of this artifact I gathered photographs, floor plan schematics, sales reports, and extensive field notes from working in the space, with leadership, staff and customers over the course of 20 months. This evidence provides a snapshot of Axmen from December 2016- August 2018. My rhetorical analysis of how Axmen communicates and shapes behaviors within it, confined to this time frame, will serve as a snapshot of a dynamic business and museum.

The museum within the store hosts community events throughout the year. During a “Photos with Santa” event, December 2016, I administered 47 voluntary, anonymous surveys about customer perceptions of Axmen. Results include insight from long-time customers as well as first-time visitors. These insights offer valuable information about why people come to the store and how they feel about the retail products and artifacts. The survey results, participant observation, and customer conversations inform my interpretation of the space.

Field notes and photographs began with my paid position for Axmen in January 2017. Because it is a unique and complex mix of specialty retail and museum, it required

a significant amount of time within the business to understand and interpret its goals and culture. Spending over 2,000 hours in the business / museum allowed me to learn the space, the activities within it, and the individuals affecting these spaces and activities. My role within the company granted me access to ongoing conversations with the leadership team, and internal documents including vision statements, the employee handbook, sales reports and floorplan diagrams. I will use this diverse set of supporting evidence to code the visual and material communication of Axmen within the identified time frame. Through iterative analysis and participant observation, I found nuanced answers to my three research questions. I first give my readers context and detail about Axmen, so that they can understand this place as a rhetorical artifact. After this, I explain the evidence for my claims of what Axmen communicates, what it hopes to communicate, and how to bridge those gaps.

Case Study

Immersing in Axmen

On the rural outskirts of a small city in the northern Rockies sits the sprawling campus of a place named Axmen. Their website claims “Axmen is the ultimate ‘everything’ store. From HOME HEATING, SPAS and ALTERNATIVE ENERGY to FARM, RANCH and FIRE FIGHTING EQUIPMENT [sic] you will find what you need here. If you can't find what you're looking for, we can order it for you! Just give us a call.” (Axmen, n.d.a). On paper, Axmen is part for-profit business, part non-profit museum. The Montana Museum of Work History is a 501c3 nonprofit museum housed within the retail business of Axmen. Throughout the three-acre grounds historic artifacts are intermixed with contemporary retail product. The line between business and museum

is blurry at best. Further complicating discernment throughout the space is the curation of items; both the business and Museum seem to display “everything.”

Axmen fills over three acres with its farm and ranch, hearth, hot tub, metal roofing, irrigation, firefighting, alternative energy, and retail store; each of these departments is infused with artifacts of local work history. Axmen explains the museum and its artifacts this way, “We have a deep respect for the roots of our business and those roots are the people of Montana. In 2007, we decided to illustrate that respect on the walls of our store and opened the Montana Museum of Work History. The Museum contains the stories of the hardworking people that make up the history of Montana” (Axmen, n.d.a).

In Axmen’s four decades of operation, it has shifted and evolved with the entrepreneur opportunities of the time. Throughout the 1970s Axmen sold many pawn and second-hand items including farm equipment and firearms. Many of the artifacts displayed in the Montana Museum of Work History were salvaged and collected from the items customers brought in to sell; some were too special not to keep.

Both co-owners of Axmen also have a passion for history and collection. Their biographies on the “About Us” section of Axmen.com claim Grant Hanson is “a genetically -inclined collector for over 40 years, who has been meticulously collecting pieces of Montana’s history,” and his brother Guy Hanson “has been a steam-powered engine enthusiast and general history buff for many many [sic] years, who continues to collect unique historical items and provide products to the people of Western Montana” (Axmen, n.d.a).

Axmen, as experienced in my research, has some stark differences from the 1973 hardware and second-hand store it started as. Curated historical items contextualize

contemporary retail product, rather than make up for-sale offerings. For the most part, new retail product inhabits the lower six feet of walls and retail fixtures throughout the space. The 14 feet of vertical space above this is museum displays, many of which hang from the warehouse-style ceiling. Axmen currently operates as both a weekly livestock feed stop and a high-end, off-grid, shopping mecca.

Overall, Axmen as a place is chaos. Everything is everywhere. Before explaining what the place communicates, and what the owners want it to communicate, it is imperative to illustrate and define the layers of chaos within Axmen. Throughout my analysis I will refer to the six-feet of vertical space from the floor, up, as the “lower world” of Axmen. This lower world is primarily contemporary, never-been-owned or used, for-sale, retail product. I will refer to the vertical space above six feet to the ceiling as the “upper world” of Axmen. This upper world is primarily historic artifacts owned and maintained by the Montana Museum of Work History; these items are not for sale. The four-acre sprawling campus has many buildings and areas including a yard where livestock equipment and general home improvement products are displayed, warehouses with backstock stoves, hot tubs, and animal feed, as well as multiple parking areas. My analysis, however, focuses on the primary building which is retail store and museum, during my time of study (December 2016 – August 2018). This primary building has two distinctly different areas. I will refer to the northern rooms of that building as the “Farm and Ranch” side of the place. A wall separates this part of Axmen from a southern room, displaying wood and gas stoves and fireplaces, as well as hot tubs and various home products. I will refer to this room as “Hearth and Home”. Keep these definitions as a legend, while I illustrate and explain the tangible and semiotic features of Axmen.

Walking up a short staircase from the parking lot, into a building sided with metal roofing, one finds themselves inside Axmen. Country music plays from an old boombox that may have been top of the line in the late 1990s. The fluorescent light fixtures are uncovered, and the sales counter near the front door rings off staff conversations, telephone calls, and walkie talkie conversations. The front foyer is a threshold. Outside, Rocky Mountain foothills roll towards a sprawling small city. Missoula, 10 miles away, has a population of roughly 73,000 (Census, 2017). Snowcapped peaks are another ridgeline into the distance. Another four steps into the building, you are surrounded by aisles of six-foot-tall racks of retail goods, and museum artifacts mounted or dangling from the walls and ceiling of this warehouse-like space. The lower world of new retail product competes against the brightly-lit upper world of museum artifacts.

Eyes dart through the many layers of the space. A cluster of twenty bright orange projectiles hang from the ceiling. The furthest wall back has a large American flag hanging behind a collection of uniforms and weapons with a World War II appearance. A centerpiece of this room, one of the three main spaces of the business and museum, is an upside down, silver and yellow, vintage airplane. Hanging from the high rafters the plane commands attention more than the vintage gas pump surrounded by cardboard cutouts of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. There are also two motorcycles in this scene. The longest wall from the foyer towards the American flag has a mounted 2x4 full of boat motors, queued up like books on a library shelf. Half of a rowboat juts out from an upstairs office. The other half juts out kitty corner from it. An elk head peers over the whole scene, as if to add a natural element to the human curated chaos.



Figure 1: Farm and Ranch entrance of Axmen, March 2018.



Figure 2: Axmen Farm and Ranch, coffee corner, January 2017.

The retail racks dominate the bottom six feet of the space. They house automotive batteries, painting supplies, farrier forges, and metal roofing supplies. Traveling towards the flag, the music softens, and the plethora of vintage motorcycles on a shelf near the ceiling emerges. From the middle of this room a dual experience of Axmen and the Montana Museum of Work History begins to emerge. Near eye level sits gondola shelves with contemporary product. Some of it is priced, some of it is not, much of it is dusty, and some appears that it may be used already.

A wood burning stove sits on a small step above the main sales floor. The fire warms the surrounding glass cases full of firearms, pelts and beadwork. Also showcased are devices. Some look like navigation tools, or two-way radios. Few, if any items are labeled. Turning from the step with museum items towards the room beyond Farm and Ranch reveals the coffee corner.



Figure 3: The back wall of Farm and Ranch, January 2017.



Figure 4: Axmen Farm and Ranch, from the stairs of Hearth and Home, January 2017.

There is a tall table near a commercial size coffee urn. Occasionally men gather around the table and talk. Occasionally food appears on the table. Staff and customers pass the corner traveling from the main room to the space beyond, where hot tubs and many types of fireplaces are sold. Behind the coffee pot is a vinyl poster of the store's history. It has a maroon background for images from the 1980s and text explaining about the forty-year history of the business. The elk and perhaps 40 more boat motors mounted high on the surrounding walls preside over the snacks and conversation in this corner. Above the boat motors is a 10x4 foot section of wall with hand-held woodworking tools. The upper world of the store is layered, with woodworking tools behind the once submerged part of boat motors, metal military helmets behind guns and bayonets, smokejumper firefighter's equipment behind motorcycles.



Figure 5: Coffee corner and stairs to stairs, Hearth and Home, January 2017.



Figure 6: Hearth and Home from the July 2017.

There appear to be as many women as men working here, though most customers appear to be male. Nearly everyone in the store is over 30 years old, and at least half appear to be over 50. From the middle of the room conversations, radio calls, and ringing phones dull into an overarching drone, in much the same way as an airport terminal. Customers either walk towards the front counter and ask for a specific staff member, or mention the item they need, and are led down the rows of gondola racks by a staff member.

The uncovered fluorescent lights mounted against the ceiling of the metal warehouse room illuminate the space; first the museum and upper world of Axmen. The lower retail world soaks up whatever light can reach it. The lower world is muted by the six-foot-tall beige racking, dispersed light, and dusty product. The upper world is scattered with missiles, bombs, timber saws, a horse drawn wagon, an airplane, and many other large, brightly colored items that appear old and quizzical. Some customers follow their chosen staff-guide to the product of their choice; others slowly shuffle through the room, heads back, mouth open, eyes wide. Mostly, staff and customers fall anywhere in-between this behavior spectrum.

Gazing around the room, I recognize only about 10 percent of the items I see in the upper world, and about 40 percent of the items in the lower world. Some museum items have typed sheets of paper with information near them. Most of those are printed on letter size paper, with black ink, and appear taped to the wall. The space feels large, full, and diverse. Many items in the upper world loom through repetition. There are nearly 50 boat motors, 20 orange missiles, 8 motorcycles, and countless guns on nearly every wall. An upstairs office is supported by beams of roughhewn timbers, creating a dark, different nook with chainsaws hanging from the rafters. The low ceiling and low-hanging vintage tools create about seven feet of clearance between the floor and artifacts. Beyond this main room, five stair steps down, is Hearth and Home.

Hearth and Home contrasts Farm and Ranch in retail product and museum artifacts. Octagon pedestals are spread across the sales floor, so that each display wood stove, gas stove, or fireplace insert can have its own facade as a customer walks by. In the center of these octagons, about four feet high, is a center pedestal full of museum artifacts including but not limited to push vacuum cleaners, toys from the 1940s, books about the American West or Native American beaded art.

In the center of Hearth and Home is an octagon-shaped room displaying insert fireplaces on the interior and exterior walls. Below the ceiling of the main space, on the roof above this room, is a horse drawn carriage from the 1800s. Surrounding this large focal point are little cannons, seemingly unrelated to the carriage, but impressive by the quantity of them. The upper world of Hearth and Home displays medieval weapons, World War II vehicles and communication devices, a Ford Model T, and a variety of hand-operated household devices like barrel washing machines. The room has higher ceilings than Farm and Ranch and feels more spacious to walk through. The number of

items and their placement, however, is overwhelming. Customers on the stairs, bottom jaw dropped, take everything in. “This is like a museum or something,” they often say. Employees laugh and respond, “it is a museum,” before guiding people to the retail product or salesperson they came to Axmen seeking.



Figure 7: Hearth and Home as Facebook Cover Photo, March 2012.ⁱⁱ

Understanding Axmen

Through iterative analysis, and participant observation, I found nuanced answers to my two research questions. For research question 1, “What does Axmen, as a place, communicate?” I found evidence to show Axmen values a specific version of the past, a chaotically curated narrative which romanticizes 1950s era gender roles and blue-collar work. This narrative of the past is shaped by the lens of white masculinity. For research question 2, “What does Axmen want to communicate?” I found evidence supporting two main messages: Axmen values the past. Axmen values hard work. I will explain the evidence for these claims, and my suggestions on how to bridge the gaps between what the owners hope this place communicates and what the tangible and semiotic features of the curated space do communicate. This artifact analysis is limited to my window of study (December 2016- August-2018). Some supporting evidence for my analysis pre-

dates my time of study but is important in order to trace the path of some of my claims (Axmen, n.d.a; Axmen, n.d.b; Hanson, n.d.).

Research Question 1: What does this site, as a place, communicate? As a place, Axmen communicates that it values a highly specific, curated version of the past. This version of the past relies on a gendered, raced, narrative which privileges the stories and worldview of white males romanticizing blue collar work and gender roles prevalent in the 1950s. This intersectionally limited worldview is curated through the tangible and semiotic features throughout Axmen. The examples I offer to support this claim are representative, not exhaustive. My examples explore some of the most prominent features of the space. I measure prominence based on visibility from lighting, color, repetition, and placement. My examples are organized thematically to shed light on how Axmen's curation of the past is gendered, classed, and raced.

Gender. The retail products, museum artifacts, and overall presentation of Axmen is overwhelmingly masculine. The most prevalent visual, from any vantage point in the space, is military paraphernalia and ammunition. Some of the most recent items in this genre are from World War II, but some handguns date back to America's Civil War. Women have served in the American military since the Revolutionary War, but overwhelmingly in "female roles" like nurse, operator, or spies, until the Department of Defense opened all combat jobs to women in 2016 (History.com Editors, 2018; Task and Purpose, 2017). Although some women may have served in the American military, this work and its related tangible items like military vehicles, uniforms, and combat tools are widely understood as masculine. Axmen is teeming with military paraphernalia and ammunition.

Another theme frequently echoed throughout the space is logging and forestry. Axes pepper the upper and lower world of Axmen. In the upper world they are part of a medieval weaponry display, a vintage wood stove display, and they even spell AXMEN at the far end of the Hearth and Home Department. In the lower world, axes of many varieties occupy about four feet of retail racking. Vintage chainsaws dangle from the rafters in the low ceiling, rough-hewn timber, section of Farm and Ranch. Many still have the grit and oil on them from their use in the forest. One section of museum items in the back corner of Hearth and Home is dedicated to Forest Service work with maps, wildland firefighting clothing, and other tools of that trade. In the lower world, contemporary chainsaws are sold and repaired, along with various accessories. A separate building towards the bottom of the four-acre campus sells municipal and wildland firefighting equipment. Logging and forestry is another trade that is highly masculine. In fact, 96% of individuals working in logging are male, and 85% are white (Data USA, 2016). Although the trade continues to shift, the prevalence of vintage items giving context to the contemporary retail product conveys an overwhelmingly masculine message.

The third large category of masculinized items are masculine pastimes including hunting, fishing, and motorized travel. The northern room of Farm and Ranch has a taxidermized animal head mounted to the wall every three feet around the perimeter of the room. Every room has head mounts. The outboard boat motors and row boat cut in half around the corner of a lofted office space scratch the surface of the fishing paraphernalia in the space. Lastly, there are at least eight motorcycles, four automobiles, one airplane, one four-wheeler, and a hang glider scattered around Axmen. Some are staged with cardboard cut outs of James Dean and Elvis, others are within military

dioramas. These tangible items of masculine pastimes including hunting, fishing, and motorized travel all signify masculinity (Smalley, 2005; Auster, 2001).

Any retail or museum display that portrays feminine content is sphered and curated through a masculine lens. Campbell (1989) gives an excellent overview of what many scholars refer to as the male public sphere (outside the home) and the female private sphere (inside the domestic home). She states:

As the cult of domesticity was codified in the United States in the early part of the century, two distinct subcultures emerged. Man's place was the world outside the home, the public realm of politics and finance...

Woman's place was home, a haven from amoral capitalism and dirty politics, where "the heart was," where the spiritual and emotional needs of husband and children were met by a 'ministering angel.' (Campbell, 1989, p. 10)

There are few, if any, feminine items in the upper world of Farm and Ranch. Most of these items are in Hearth and Home. Hearth and Home is most like the private or domestic sphere with its stove octagons and walls staged to look like a home. A large train set looms over the space, peppered with vintage children's toys. The top of an octagon in the corner past the Farm and Ranch stairs has female tools and trinkets... push vacuums, silver hand mirror and brush, vintage reading glasses, and even a female douche. The other back corner of Hearth and Home has vintage washing machines, some household items like glass oil lamps, and more children's toys. One employee likes to direct museum gazers to that corner referring to it as "the women's torture corner."

There are few retail items curated for women. Hearth and Home has a limited variety of wall art decorations, stove-top trivets and steamers, and locally crafted pottery. Farm and Ranch now houses the soft goods section I developed as part of my work for Axmen. It features home goods like Pendleton blankets, towels, and men's and women's workwear and outdoor lifestyle items. These items are outliers in a business full of wildlife traps, metal roofing materials, timber harvesting equipment, livestock equipment, and technical heating devices.

Overarching any female experience, narrative, or retail needs, are curated through a male lens. This male lens sequesters females to the private sphere of domestic chores and reduces them to tokens. They are tokenized as homemakers, children's caretakers, and beauty product consumers. Campbell explains that in response to the urbanization and industrialization of the nineteenth century "the concept of 'true womanhood' (Welter 1976), or the 'woman belle ideal' (Scott 1970), defined females as 'other,' as suited only for a limited repertoire of gender-based roles, and as the repository of cherished but commercially useless spiritual and human values" (1989, p.10). Of all the tangible items within Axmen, historic and contemporary, few give voice to the female experience, as lived and communicated from a female. Indeed, they represent women as "others."

Class. Many items in Axmen date back to the early 1900s through the 1960s. Military dioramas give context to German and Soviet weapons from WWII. Retro gas pumps are staged with retro soda pop vending machines and cardboard cut outs of Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe. The vast majority of curated items in the upper and lower world of Axmen glorify blue collar work and manual labor. This

romanticized portrayal of logging, farming, and military service reduces those in this work to humble, labor-competent men, and omits narratives of the hardship involved in this type of work. The glorification of submissive service to America is an attitude prevalent in 1950s. Faludi (1999) explores this in her book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. She states, many baby-boom boys, raised by fathers who did not divulge details about their World War II experience, fantasized about the heroics of war.

Many of these fathers were veterans of World War II or Korea, but their bloody paths to virility were not ones they sought to pass on, or usually even discuss. Because the fathers offered few particulars about their 'baptisms' at Normandy or Midway or Heartbreak Ridge, was a remote romance that each boy have to embellish with details culled from Sergeant Rock and his combat adventures in DC comics... or later, GI Joe and his miniature arsenal. (Faludi, 1999, p.5)

Faludi's concept of military and war as a remote fantasy to the generation of boys growing up in the 1950s, who grew into men idolizing their father's generation, fits the tangible features of Axmen. The nostalgia infused in other lower class / blue collar work portrayals around the space also have an air of romance, in much the same way the Buffalo Bill Museum carnivalized conflict and exploration of America's Western Frontier (Dickinson et al., 2005). In both cases, a loosely authentic version of "the past" is presented as true history.

Race. Females are not the only tokenized group at Axmen. Axmen is a white man's world, as told by a white man's narrative. Home and Hearth has a sprinkling of Native American items: paintings of indigenous people on horseback wearing clothing from the 1800s or earlier, wooden totems of a chief much like the ones seen in cigar

shops, and a mixture of authentic and kitschy beaded jewelry. The octagon top that displays primarily Native American artifacts has other “wild West” items like a vintage saddle, and books and images of Buffalo Bill Cody. The back wall of Hearth and Home has a large banner that reads “Go West, Young Man, and Grow Up With the Country.” Overall, the tangible features in Axmen weave the white man’s tale of a wild West being explored, tamed, and domesticated by white men and their homemaking women. This narrative sequesters indigenous communities to part of “the wild west,” reducing their people and culture to tokens of America’s frontier, rather than the resilient, culturally diverse, people who continue to live (and shop) in the Axmen area.

Beyond Native Americans, the only hint at a narrative for other races is a rope, tied in a noose, dangling from an old turn-style counter, on the back wall of Home and Hearth. This powerful, raced, violence signifying symbol hangs casually in the midst of other randomly arranged items in the upper world of the business, in a visually prominent place. It dangles above “AXMEN,” spelled out in axes. I did not specifically ask the owners about the noose, and it has no sign or verbiage with it. I speculate the reason for it may be a reference to vigilantes who worked around Montana when it was a territorial capitol, attempting to maintain law and order (Allen, 2001). There are no tangible items or semiotic features near the noose that would give a lay viewer this context. A noose, dangling from high above, is a powerful signifying symbol. In most places in the United States it conjures violent messages of African American slaves, the Civil Rights Movement, the Ku Klux Klan, and many lynching associated with them (Godhardt, 2017). In a lynching archive with information on hangings between the years 1882-1968, out of 4,745 reported lynchings, 73% are “negroes” or African Americans (Tuskegee University, 2010). The remaining 27% of lynchings are “white”, no other ethnic

backgrounds are reported in this archive (Tuskegee University, 2010). Although hanging has been a form of capital punishment for diverse races in the United States, it is overwhelmingly an act perpetrated against African Americans. As western Montana residents and visitors continue to become more diverse, displaying a meaning-packed symbol like a noose becomes more problematic in its racial exclusivity.



Figure 8: Noose hanging on a back wall of Hearth and Home, Facebook Cover Photo, April 2015.



Figure 9: Back wall of Hearth and Home as seen from this room's front door, March 2018.

Research Question 2: What does this site, as a place of business, seek to communicate? The curators and owners of Axmen value the past and hard work and hope to communicate that through the tangible and semiotic features of their space. The first obvious evidence that Axmen values the past can be seen in the Montana Museum of Work History, which is housed in the same space as the retail business. The website states, “Montana Museum of Work History is a celebration of the innovation and work ethic that allowed people to survive and prosper in Montana,” (Axmen, n.d.a). This celebration incorporates the physical showing of tools, trade, and work practices of Montanans through history. The sheer number of artifacts within the rooms of the business creates an immersive experience to anyone in the space. Whether employee,

customer, or museum visitor, each person walking through Axmen is immersed in items signifying the past.

Not only is the upper world of Axmen supersaturated with vintage chainsaws, World War II paraphernalia, and transportation from the 1800s – 1970s, it also displays items and stories retelling Axmen's past. The corner with the commercial coffee urn is open, airy, and has line of sight to many different places within the store. This corner is socially and geographically a hub of both employees and customers. Free coffee and condiments are offered there, and frequently pastries, fruit, and fresh vegetables are laid out as communal treats on this table. The corner is bright, with tall ceilings and an open stairwell to the Hearth and Home salesfloor. In a business with six-foot tall gondola racking, and five-foot tall octagons with stoves and artifacts, it is unique within Axmen to stand in a place with high visibility. On the wall behind the commercial coffee urn is a 40x20 vinyl poster titled "40 Years at Axmen." This poster features images of the founding brothers of the business from the 1980s, as well as early employees. Its text speaks to how the business started, and grew, from Bud Hanson, to his sons Grant and Guy. The overall message from the poster is appreciation for family, community, and the business- all or which continue to grow together. This poster, in this central location of the business and museum, narrates Axmen's value of its own past of innovation and work ethic.

The second piece of Axmen's intended rhetorical message is that they value hard work, or what many would refer to as blue collar work. The quantity and visual pervasiveness of artifacts signifying labor-intensive work is palpable: large chainsaws, wood planers, wildlife traps, military firearms, and agricultural hand tools. Even in Hearth and Home, which displays significantly more domestic / home goods, the tools

found there are labor intensive: hand operated washing machines, wood stoves, and push vacuums paint a picture of the labor involved in maintaining a clean, comfortable, presentable home.

Many of the contemporary retail items are also labor intensive. Farm and ranch equipment like headstall catches for cattle, castration devices, horseshoes, anvils, wildlife traps, chainsaws, and metal roofing pieces rhetorically communicate that people who shop there do physically laborious work. In Hearth and Home, under vintage wood stoves, are contemporary wood stoves, wood splitting devices, wood carrying devices, products to clean and maintain chimneys, grills, and outdoor kitchen accoutrements. Although they also sell natural gas or propane fueled heating stoves and inserts, the wood burning items take a prominent place near the front door of Home and Hearth. This wood-burning area that features contemporary and vintage wood -burning stoves and accoutrements is the first space encountered whether someone enters Home and Hearth from its own front door from the parking lot, or the threshold stairs from Farm and Ranch near the coffee corner. Sleek, modern, gas burning inserts are tucked in their own octagon room, or on the back walls of Home and Hearth. Prominently displaying the most labor-intensive heating source within Hearth and Home maintains the rhetorical message of Axmen valuing hard work.

Interestingly, high-dollar hot tubs are also sold within this space. The spas are focused on body wellness and recuperation, which in a different sales space may seem luxurious and pampering. However, situated in the greater context of Axmen these wellness focused spas communicate a deeper message of “you’re going to need to relax and restore your body after a long day’s work so that you’re ready to get back to it tomorrow.” Point of sale posters and a revolving video on a flat screen television behind

the hot tubs boasts the wellness benefits of therapeutic jets and warm water immersion. Their carefully crafted message posits these high-end hot tubs as a holistic health investment, one that helps combat the rigors and stress of hard work.

Research Question 3: What can the owners of Axmen do to bridge the gaps between what it wants to communicate, and what it currently communicates? There are a handful of ways Axmen can bridge the gap between what it wants to communicate to people interacting with the place, and what it actually communicates. Much like the Buffalo Bill Museum took their former fictionalized, carnivalized version of the past (Dickinson et al., 2005) and remodeled the space as a thematically organized hymn to the American West (Dickinson et al., 2013), Axmen has opportunities to curate their space more authentically and effectively. Most of my suggestions rest in the intersectional opportunities to consider and curate multifaceted, authentic stories of what hard work has looked like throughout time.

As a public space, and nonprofit museum, there are moral implications to the messages conveyed through the tangible and semiotic features of Axmen. The founding internal document of The Montana Museum of Work History proposes the museum will “chronicle and display, in interactive fashion, the tools, people, and processes that people used in Montana to do their daily work” (Hanson, n.d.). Only telling stories through the lens of white males silences the experiences of females, people of color, and/or authentic blue-collar workers. Axmen’s current approach and arrangement of tangible items within the space excludes many population demographics of the local community as well as visiting tourists. This is problematic in historical representations and contemporary customer / visitor connections. If Axmen’s goal is to communicate they value the past,

and hard work, they should strive to value an inclusive past, that incorporates the multi-faceted work of multiple genders, classes, and races.

One way to do this is to intentionally curate displays that give voice to these “othered” narratives. The female experience, even if in gendered roles, could be incorporated more in the military displays. It could also be woven more authentically, throughout other spaces in the business. Similarly, a more authentic narrative of labor-focused, blue-collar, work might include artifacts and information about workers unions, company town lifestyle, or the mental and physical detriments to veterans. Finally, Native Americans are not historic tokens or wild west show actors. To portray the past and hard work relevant to this group of people, many of whom live near Axmen in the Flathead Valley and Blackfeet Nation, Axmen could reach out to elders and experts to learn, curate, and display, historical and contemporary indigenous ways of “work.”

The good news is efforts to bridge this gap have already started. The addition of soft goods to the Farm and Ranch’s retail offerings helped bring the experiences of contemporary female and Native American people into the space. This new area gave careful consideration to the museum artifacts being reworked in the space, and to authentically include, rather than tokenize populations who are frequently “othered.” This new section includes Pendleton blankets, mugs, and clothing that are relevant to past and present narratives of indigenous communities. Selling a variety of clothing for men and women, in different price brackets (a \$20 button-up shirt and a \$165 button-up shirt), for different purposes (investment, lifestyle garments like the \$240 Pendleton sweater worn in *The Big Lebowski* to utilitarian work garments like the \$75 Berne duck canvas bib overalls) helps make this newer section of Axmen inclusive and accessible to multiple demographics.



Figure 10: Recently developed soft goods section of Farm and Ranch, September 2017.

Another part of the business that appeals to multiple demographics without tokenizing them is the feed and animal health section of Farm and Ranch. This area sells price-point livestock feed and high-end organic or specialized foods and supplements. The feed and animal health section of the business is not overly gendered. Although this section displays products that purport dirty, physically-intensive labor like branding and castrating calves, the work does not rhetorically stay in the male or public sphere. Many livestock or pet operations are based out of the home, making the line between public and private sphere blurry for these home hobbies or businesses. In some ways, the feed and animal health section subverts separate gender spheres and capitalizes on the spiritual and emotional strengths of the traditional female caretaking role. This area draws on highly masculine cowboy narratives still prevalent in contemporary Montana, as well as feminine 4-H club narratives of information sharing and animal caretaking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my study aims to trace rhetoric's expansion from traditional, verbal-based artifacts to the nondiscursive symbols found in the two-dimensional artifacts of visual culture, and three-dimensional artifacts such as retail stores and museums. Axmen, the artifact in this case study is both retail store and museum. Using a mixed

methods approach to analyze how the tangible and semiotic features of Axmen work together to communicate a message has theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, my analysis offers a lively case study which combines research methods from qualitative communication studies, participatory rhetoric, and rhetoric of place to understand how a three-dimensional artifact communicates messages. Rhetoric of place is a growing scholarly approach that is more accessible to lay viewers, not overly versed in fine art and aesthetic critique. Understanding its background and establishing more explicit definitions for how this approach differs from traditional rhetoric or visual rhetoric is helpful as the field grows. Although other scholars have taken a single site and analyzed it before and after a remodel (Aiello and Dickinson, 2014; Dickinson, 2002; Dickinson et al., 2005; and Dickinson et al., 2013), my study bridges these efforts by, in a single study, analyzing a place and offering practical suggestions on how the curators of this space can rework the tangible and semiotic features of the place to better communicate their intended messages.

Practically, my study offers specific suggestions to how the curators of Axmen can tell multifaceted narratives that better represent the nuanced, intersectional, experiences of the past. Bringing awareness to the single-lens narrative of the past currently represented at Axmen is a ripe opportunity for growth and change. My suggestions to intentionally curate narratives that include multiple genders, economic classes, and races, are not insinuating that the male, affluent, white narrative needs to be completely omitted from the place. Of the 1,050,493 estimated people living in Montana as of July 1, 2017, 50.4% are male, 89.1% are white, and 18.1% are over 65 years in age (Census, 2017). Telling stories of the white, male, baby boomer, experience is relevant demographically. However, updated, multi-faceted portrayals of the female experience of

the past and hard work would appeal to 49.6% of Montana's population. Similarly, updating the current tokenized minority artifacts to authentic portrayals of multiple races would boost inclusivity.

My analysis, its implications, and suggestions are not only for rhetoric of place's theoretical expansion, or for Axmen to appeal to a broader audience. This study is part of a larger discussion America is having about multi-faceted, nuanced, complex, and accurate representations of the past being told at story-telling sites. My analysis shows that places are not always curated in a way that communicates the message intended by its curators. Curating a space to communicate intended messages takes time and intention; it is worth doing.

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ⁱ Figures 1-6, and 9-10 are photographs taken and reproduced by the author.

ⁱⁱ Figures 7-8 are from Axmen's Facebook page, listed in References as Axmen (n.d.b).